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From the Editor

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From the Editor –

For many years Hamilton College Library's special collections department has eagerly gathered, preserved, and cataloged materials from a wide array of American communal societies. At present, materials in these collections include significant examples from the House of David/Mary's City of David, Harmony Society, Amana Colonies, Ephrata Cloister, Zoar Society, Rajneeshpuram, and Kerista communities. A special effort has also gone into acquiring material in print and manuscript from the United Society of Believers—commonly called Shakers. For the first time, an issue of the journal will be devoted entirely to a recent major acquisition, in this instance, the most comprehensive collection of Shaker ephemera ever assembled—the M. Stephen and Miriam R. Miller Collection.

Steve, as he prefers to be called, began this collection “inauspiciously” in 1978 with the purchase of a single can wrapper, ca. 1890, from Mount Lebanon. By the time he was approached by Hancock Shaker Village to mount a first-time-ever exhibit of Shaker ephemera in 1987, his personal collection had grown to almost a thousand items. In the catalog he later wrote and self-published for that exhibit, he defined ephemera as “printed material intended for one-time or short-term use.” This is as succinct and accurate a definition as can be found.

Going into my last year as head of the library at Hamilton College in 2010, I was happy with the progress we had made in developing our communal studies collection, specifically our Shaker items. Walter Brumm's gift of his collection starting in 2004 was a major milestone in that process. Eager to continue building upon our holdings, I was intrigued by my colleague Christian Goodwillie's suggestion to contact Steve Miller regarding his long-term plans for his collection, and whether he might consider housing it at Hamilton College. Steve was noncommittal but agreed to continue the discussion and to visit the library, which ultimately led to an agreement between him and Hamilton.

The acquisition of the Miller collection, by purchase and gift, was the last major piece of business for me before retiring in the summer of 2011. Due to the size and scope of the collection, the actual transfer will take place over a ten-year period. The first two installments have now been completed. The ten-year time frame allows the library the time necessary to catalog, digitize, and properly store this vast collection. Some notable portions of the Miller collection are the following:

- A comprehensive array of seed envelopes, representing nine communities
- A group of twenty-five intact herb “bricks” from Harvard, Mass.
- More than thirty-five medicine bottles from the infirmary at Canterbury, many pictured in an article about the community in *Life*, March 1949
- Nineteen different chair catalogs from the 1870s
- Scores of billheads from a dozen communities
- Approximately ten thousand herb and medicinal labels from New Lebanon and Watervliet, many still bundled with original strings, from the 1850s
- Unique surviving examples of broadsides from many communities
- The largest known group of containers, many with contents, advertising brochures, and related ephemera from the last major medicine business, the “Shaker Extract of Roots.”

This will give the reader a sense of the scope of this acquisition. Much of the collection has been illustrated in four publications that Steve has authored over the years, using the collection as a “window” through which to explore the multifarious Shaker industries. It has long been his thesis that without an economic base to support their unique lifestyle the Shakers could never have survived, let alone thrived, as a movement. Hamilton College Library’s special collections under the leadership of Christian Goodwillie, will continue these explorations and will open the collection for others to use.